

2018

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Recommended Citation

Mauslein, Nathan (2018) "German Hands and Cultural Clay: Martin Luther's Impact on Germanic Culture," *Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 22 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://openspaces.unk.edu/undergraduate-research-journal/vol22/iss1/9>

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German Hands and Cultural Clay: Martin Luther's Impact on Germanic Culture

Nathan Mauslein

LUTHER'S RENAISSANCE

The Holy Roman Empire's history in the heart of Europe was long and turbulent, with strong leaders such as Charlemagne and Otto the Great leaving deep and lasting impressions upon the Germanic people that resided within it. During the Renaissance, like much of the rest of the continent, this period and thereafter would be marked not by a ruler but by a common man. Martin Luther, like the other thinkers of the time, questioned the status quo, analyzing his world and comparing it to the standards set forth by earlier men, in his case the early church. Despite being a religious figure, his writings would shape much more than his own relationship with God; it would forever change the Holy Roman Empire and modern Germany for better or for worse. To understand his impact on not only the religious but secular world, one must understand his role in the Protestant Reformation, his impact on German culture, and his influence on the political relationships between strata.

The Holy Roman Empire during the time of Martin Luther was far from a solidified Nation State, and the balance of power within it would allow the radical ideas of a young Martin Luther to flourish. The Empire itself was a loose amalgamation of principalities, cities, and peasantry ruled from the top by an elected Emperor. Seven electors would choose the Emperor, but the Empire truly had the Hapsburgs as their established dynasty. The desire in these semi-autonomous regions revolved around their own growth and prestige, not just that of the Empire as a whole. In Wittenberg these desires would take hold and allow a radical monk to speak

unashamedly, and eventually elevate Wittenberg as a religious Mecca in the 1500s. Martin Luther did not set out as a reformer in order to bring prestige for Wittenberg, but his radical behavior was protected by the attention it gave.

The Protestant Reformation was the result of years of self-reflection and years of intense study on behalf of Martin Luther. Prior to the 95 theses he is famous for, Martin Luther saw contradictions within the teaching of the papacy, which sentiments would later be shared by many fellow Germans. Chief among his concerns were indulgences. Indulgences were bought to gain one's own salvation or that of a loved one. The money itself funded the church or possibly a secular ruler. Luther's own local Prince, Friedrich der Weise, had in Wittenberg castle a collection numbering some 19,000 relics.¹

The nobility of the Holy Roman Empire were not the only ones profiting from the highly lucrative indulgence trade; the originator and enabler of such practices was the Pope. "In 1515 Pope Leo X proclaimed an indulgence to raise money to help build St. Peter's Basilica in distant Rome, a project begun about a decade earlier."² Many viewed these indulgences as a drain upon the local populace to build extravagances abroad, caused by the Pope himself, without offering any true salvation. In order to arrange for the payment of St. Peter's Basilica, Pope Leo X granted Albrecht of Brandenburg a papal dispensation to be both the Archbishop of Magdeburg and the Archbishop of Mainz, and in doing so Albrecht had to help finance the Basilica and use Johann Tetzel to sell the indulgences.³ Thus, not only were the powerful secular rulers of the

¹ Carter, Lindberg. *The European Reformations*. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.), 58.

² Brad, Gregory S. *Rebel in the ranks: Martin Luther, the Reformation, and the conflicts that continue to shape our world*. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017.), 41.

³ Gregory, *Rebel in the Ranks*, 41.

Empire abusing indulgences, the Pope himself, the most powerful church official in the Holy Roman Empire, was also part of the scam.

During the sale of this particular indulgence in the Holy Roman Empire, Luther was working on his doctrine of justification by faith alone, which at its core disputes the church's ability to grant salvation, reserving that privilege for God alone.⁴ He saw his own ideas coming into stark contrast with a system he belonged to, and wanted to press forward a debate. Martin Luther posted his grievances with the church on the Wittenberg church door in 1517, and, with the help of the printing press, it made him simultaneously an overnight hero or villain in the eyes of commoners and rulers alike.⁵ The 95 theses were circulated far and wide, bringing to life a debate in the houses, schools, and churches that had one only previously existed in the mind of Martin Luther and in the minds of other like-minded reformers. Although by modern standards these thoughts are not truly radical, in fact they are seemingly mild, they only seem mild today due to the fierce debate raging 500 years prior.

In nailing his theses to the door, he forever altered the religious landscape of the Germanic people if not all of Christendom, ripping the Empire asunder, and causing generations to be marred by bloodshed and infighting. The theological battle would not just take place in the arena of scholarly writing, but also political and military battlegrounds. The results of such battles can ever be seen in the modern world with the Catholic church lacking a monopoly over the Christian faith. The existence of his own brand of Christianity is a testament to his own impact during this time period. Martin Luther not only shook a Nation, he shook faith itself, and in doing so transformed its language, education, and culture.

⁴ Phillip, Campbell. *Heroes & Heretics Of the Reformation*. (Tan Books & Pub, 2017.), 72.

⁵ Ruth H., Sanders. *German: biography of a language*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.), 123.

Martin Luther leaves his lasting legacy within the modern German language, an unforeseen result of attempting to allow common men to view the holy scripture in one's native tongue. His desire to enable the common man to read the Bible lies within the importance he himself place upon the Bible above all other written works. Luther's early mentor and colleague Johann von Staupitz took an interest in Luther's knowledge of the Bible and as Eric Metaxas states, "What impressed Staupitz about Luther was not merely his impressive intelligence and abilities as a scholar but his relationship with the Bible itself. This was in that time and place not only rare but unique. As Luther often said, no one at that time read the Bible."⁶ This practice not only applied to the average illiterate or semi-literate man, but even to the Theologians and clergy themselves who seldom read, let alone deeply probed, the Bible. Luther not only wanted the Bible to take centerstage in Theological discussions, it must take centerstage for the common man because to him it was in fact the divine word of God.

To translate the Bible from Latin into German was uncharted territory, and as with most revolutionary works, unforeseen results would abound. The Bible would be translated into a linguistic weapon that would attack the reliance on others for one's salvation and relationship with God. In Luther's exile he set himself forth to translating the Bible into understandable German. This translation was no small feat due to two distinctive dialects dividing the Empire geographically, Hochdeutsch (high German) spoken in the South, and Plattdeutsch (low German) spoken in the North. Instead of making two distinctive Bibles he used an amalgamation of both dialects, but primarily used Hochdeutsch.⁷

⁶ Eric, Metaxas. *Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World*. (Penguin Publishing Group, 2017.), 67.

⁷ Sanders, *German*, 137-138.

One doesn't simply change the course of a language by oneself, for it was mass production, distribution, and popularity of the Luther Bible that made the change. The first edition of the Luther Bible printed in 1522 had a run of 3,000 copies, and by the end of his lifetime Wittenberg alone printed 100,000 copies of the Luther Bible.⁸ During the early 1500s only 10% of the Empire was considered literate, yet book fairs, universities, churches, and the public readings of the Luther Bible ensured the reach of the book extended far beyond those who could read the Luther Bible, and in particular in Northern Germany.⁹ The involvement of these numerous parties shows Luther's writing became a cultural force of its own, coming alive in lecture halls and public squares. Luther could not have foreseen the lengths his translation would travel.

The printing revolution truly made Martin Luther a bestselling author in his own right and transformed a language. Modern German, as a result, is Hochdeutsch; it is taught in schools and is universally intelligible by German speakers. With the exceptions of minor regional words or pronunciations, Luther's German found itself extending all the way from Schleswig-Holstein in the North all the way to Baden-Württemberg and Bayern in the South. This cultural phenomenon is uniquely German and religious in nature. Luther's diligent work in many other areas would greatly impact German culture.

Just as the Bible was a tool for the education of Christians in all strata of life that had other consequences, other aspects of Lutheran teachings would help shape the Lutheran faith. Unlike the Catholic faith, Lutherans would place a greater importance on that of audience participation during church services, resulting in a cultural and educational change. As Gregory eloquently states about Luther's relationship with music "Lutherans sing like the members of no

⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 120-122.

other Christian tradition in the period. They collectively embrace Luther's own love of music and hymn writing. Of the nearly two thousand editions of German hymnals printed between 1520 and 1600, at least three-quarters are Lutheran."¹⁰ These hymnals were primarily used in a home setting for families and friends, but they also could be used during church services.¹¹ Like his Bible they weren't written in the Latin language but that of their native German. The repetition of these songs aided in one's understanding of scripture and did not rely upon one's literacy to ensure people understood the lessons.

To move Christian practices outside of the Church, Luther and his contemporaries tried to further educate commoners and clergy alike by the publication of instructional guides. Luther wrote the Large and Small Catechisms to be a clear interpretation of the Bible as far as he understood, voiced in a way the average man could understand. This effort on his part was widely popular and both the Large and the Small Catechisms were best sellers widely circulated throughout the Empire. Despite their widespread distribution, the Large and Small Catechisms had not achieved their primary goal, of fully educating the common man beyond repetition. Regardless of the failure of Luther's designed intentions, its importance is clear, efforts would be made to educate the common man, and Christian values would indeed shape schooling for centuries to come.¹²

The failure didn't stem from their distribution, because they were indeed best sellers, but from their effect on the desired goal. Luther saw many of the rural areas acted upon superstition or ignorance rather than a deep understanding of the Bible's teachings and not just the perception of understanding. However, the Catechisms never helped attain that deep understanding. They

¹⁰ Gregory, *Rebel in the Ranks*, 150.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

were heard in the church, in school, or in the family household and drilled into people. All this effort just resulted in another layer of repetition the lay Christian would regurgitate to others.¹³

The very same lack of understanding Luther found in the peasantry was well reflected in who had taught them, the clergy. His whole life he had been surrounded by men who were considered well respected Theologians, yet in his eyes they came to drastically different, and dangerous, conclusions. Many clergy members gained their power through bribery or familial power such as Albrecht von Brandenburg. But Luther stressed knowledge of the Bible at every local parish, and that the clergy were still useful to guide people, as long as their message was that of God. For once people could see the importance of Scripture being placed above wealth or power.

Even though the next few centuries would see the German language solidify under Luther's vision and numerous other cultural changes take place, his religious Reformation would soon divide the Empire and shake its power structure. One goal of the Reformation was to remove and deny the Pope's authority over the religious and secular lives of people and to focus mainly on the Scripture. Luther saw the papacy as the cause of man's plight as "In 1520 Luther came to view the Pope and the Papacy as the anti-Christ."¹⁴ Not only was the peasantry divided by the new Reformation, but the whole of the Empire was divided between a Protestant North and a Catholic South, which despite the population's mobility can still be seen today. It wasn't just for religious reasons the North turned Protestant; many Princes had much to gain by breaking faith with the church. The Princes threw their support behind Protestantism because it became a pathway towards autonomy. This secular autonomy even came down to princely

¹³ Ibid., 150-151.

¹⁴ David M., Whitford. *The Papal Antichrist: Martin Luther and the Underappreciated Influence of Lorenzo Valla*. *Renaissance Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 26-52. Accessed October 3, 2017., 27.

powers, “writing to his friend Wenzeslaus Link, Luther explained that the prince as prince is a political person, and thus does not act as a Christian, who neither is prince, nor male, nor whatever in the world of persons.”¹⁵

Bloodletting was quick to commence as a result of the Reformation’s revolutionary nature and can be seen in the Peasant’s War (1524-1525). Many amongst the peasantry, lesser nobles, and even some clergy felt a revolution in religious ideology would be mirrored by drastic changes in other aspects of their lives. Similar to other time periods full of unrest, this fervor would translate into people resorting to their arms instead of the pen such as Luther had been doing. The peasants who took part in the Peasant’s War tried to twist the ideas of the Reformation into not just a religious war, but a class-based war. This movement may have been inspired by Martin Luther, but it was a chaotic twist formed by the lack of the people’s own understanding of Luther’s teachings.

From the viewpoint of the combatants on the peasant’s side, their feudal lords were like the papacy in that they were systematically oppressed and taxed heavily by both. In a time where the church itself was seemingly set in stone and its power seemed insurmountable, yet the church still was stunned by one man and the Reformation, made the peasants believe their secular oppressors too could be cast off. In large parts the peasantry did not live in a totally secular society, and if the Catholic Church wasn’t ordained by god and run in his image, then neither were the lords who had prospered under the rule of the church and placed harsh taxes or conditions upon their citizenry. The peasants formed into multiple armies possessing many different and possibly unrelated grievances throughout the Empire, yet these armies failed to

¹⁵ John M., Headley. Luther And The Problem Of Secularization. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 21-38., 24.

form behind a true leader or one defined goal. High levels of disorganization led to the peasants losing numerous battles between 1524 and 1525, and their main goals went unachieved beyond the destruction or occupation of some noble or religious buildings.¹⁶

From the viewpoint of the Princes and combatants along the other side, this war was a betrayal and a barbaric revolt. This revolt was a direct threat against not only an individual's life, but that of the entire economic system in place within the Holy Roman Empire for generations. This serfdom had not merely been just the economic system, which had existed in much of Europe, but also a way of ensuring social order, enriching seemingly qualified families through the use of peasant labor, in exchange for the protection of the noble family. Since the noble's responsibility was the defense and growth of the land, they had well-armed and funded forces at their command, which resulted in the eventual defeat of the horde of peasants. The peasants themselves felt as if they were taking the logical steps forward that Luther would applaud; however, Luther condemned the war as a whole and took the side of the lords.

Although Martin Luther's eventual condemnation of the peasants would come as a shock to them, it was actually fairly predictable. Luther viewed the human's material world and body as existing separately from the spiritual and religious world. His role in the Reformation was to return people's gaze to the Bible and to change their understanding of their relationship with God. He had no desire to drive societal changes beyond the church because just as he saw the spirit and human form as separate entities, he too saw secular rule as separate from the rule of God, and the two should not overlap. In 1523 prior to the Peasant's War, he wrote a pamphlet titled "*On Secular Authority: How Far Does the Obedience Owed to It Extend?*"¹⁷ This pamphlet further illustrates that secular rule cannot harm one's salvation.

¹⁶ Gregory, *Rebel in the Ranks*, 111-114.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

Even though secular rule and the spiritual self do not fully coexist Luther believed that the peasants not only failed to bring glory to God, but in fact had disobeyed God. Luther had quoted the apostle Paul by saying “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.”¹⁸ The actual bloodshed during the Peasant’s War just a year later would fully have him backing the actions of the Princes, no matter how drastic they may become. Martin Luther had seen his ideas be bastardized and turned into weapons that had threatened the established order within the Holy Roman Empire.

During the war itself he wrote a pamphlet called “*Wider die räuberischen und mörderischen Rotten der Bauern*” (‘Against the murderous, thieving hordes of peasants’), condemning the peasants revolt.¹⁹ The war itself had threatened stability and it did nothing to further the faith, nor did it bring worldly benefits to those who partook in it. Despite being a revolutionary Theologian, social reforms did not drive him, much less a complete overthrow of the current rulers. Despite how ineffective the peasant bands were, or how one sided the fighting was the nobles had to make necessary changes, and sadly for the peasants those changes would be that of strengthening controls against revolutionary behavior. Luther however had not only given a green light to the nobles to react with full force, he had attacked the ideals of the peasants themselves.

Luther was seen as a man of the people for he brought them the word of God, attacked the economic monopoly the church had over salvation, and stood by his beliefs with an intense desire to help all even in the face of death. When confronted by the twelve articles of the peasants in Swabia, he rapidly picked up his pen. “His verdict was published in a pamphlet

¹⁸ Ibid., 114.

¹⁹ Sanders, *German*, 129.

entitled ‘Admonition to peace, a Reply to the Twelve Articles of the peasants of Swabia’.²⁰ In doing so he challenged the peasants in revolt and condemned their actions by stating “Christians do not fight for themselves with sword and musket, but with the cross and with suffering, just as Christ, our leader, does not bear a sword, but hangs on the cross.”²¹ If change was to be brought, it would be from the top down and not the other way around.

For numerous generations in Christendom, the Catholic Church was supreme, and despite other States having independent rulers, their right to rule was still granted by God. The early Reformation was a time of rapid change, which drastically changed the religious landscape of their world. Such a drastic change in religion seemed to indicate the need for a radically different change in governance. Luther benefitted from Friedrich der Weise’s protection, and he viewed many of the current Germanic Princes as a bulwark against the greater threat, the Catholic Church.²² These rulers were uniquely German and now would not be held accountable to a foreign Pope.

The material world for Luther played a lesser role than the eternal and spiritual world. The Catholic Church was a threat due to its perversion of faith, not just its economic and political power. Ruled by secular noble leadership was always a greater benefit to a Christian than the heretical nature of the Catholic Church. As Gregory deduces “In Lutheran territories as elsewhere, what is idealized as a partnership between church and state plays out as a subordination of church to state. However free the inner man might be in conscience and faith, the embodied person is subject to political control.”²³ As long as these rulers were granting

²⁰ Heinz, Schilling. *Martin Luther: rebel in an age of upheaval*. (Oxford: Oxford university press, 2017.), 250.

²¹ Schilling, *Martin Luther*, 252.

²² Campbell, *Heroes and Heretics of the Reformation*, 93.

²³ Gregory, *Rebel in the Ranks*, 151.

stability in the material world, they should not be challenged since they were secular and German instead of tyrannical and Catholic.

The vacuum of power in the secular and religious world only existed for a brief moment in time and was soon filled by numerous Protestant reformers, beliefs, and rulers. The local rulers chose which ideology to follow to their benefit, and in the case of Protestant rulers, they could appropriate land from the church and the possible taxes the Church would have levied on that area. For the peasants, as long as they were in an area that enabled their religious choices, they could form new churches that didn't have to adhere to the Catholic model and run it from the ground up. These often local movements shaped the numerous autonomous lands within the Holy Roman Empire and helped delay the eventual unification of Germany till 1871. This entire movement began by one radical monk, and he would bring fortune or ruin to his supporters or his opposition.

The Holy Roman Empire and modern Germany were forever shaped by Martin Luther during the Renaissance. His role in the Reformation created massive changes, had a long-lasting impact on their language, their culture, and lastly, altered the political interactions of the Empire. Luther, like his contemporaries, sought a greater understanding of his world, and in doing so reshaped the world around him. The Germanic people and even the whole of Western society were forever changed by 95 theses and the sharp wit of Martin Luther. No longer would the Catholic church go unquestioned. No longer would the common man go without understanding his own religion. No longer would princes be chained to the papacy. Martin Luther truly sculpted the Western World.

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